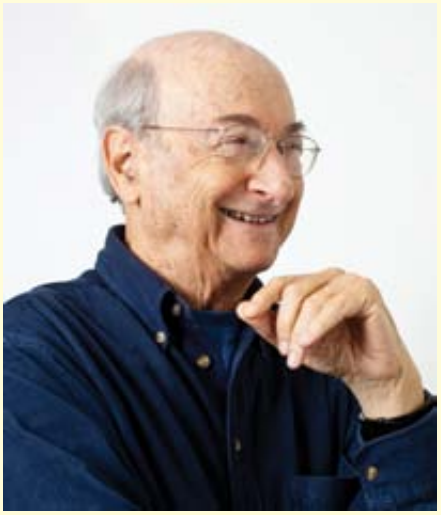
Cities in transition



Jorge Wilheim

Architect and urban planner

Solange Monteiro, *São Paulo*

SEVERAL TOWNS MERGING with suburbs of one or more cities, traffic jams, and popular demonstrations—big Brazilian cities are in a constant state of bubbling, says Jorge Wilheim. This son of Italians, who lives in São Paulo city and is the creator of such city architectural icons as the Anhembi Park, argues that this process reflects a period of transition as society embraces the search for legitimacy, representation, and greater participation. He has also drawn up urban plans for Curitiba, Campinas, and Natal cities. Twice Planning Secretary of São Paulo city, during the administrations of Mario Covas (1983–85) and Martha Suplicy (2001–04), Wilheim criticizes several misguided policies that have prevented expansion of public transport in Brazil. He also argues that in planning, "It is necessary to transform space into place, which is the space to which you lend emotion. The essence of urban planning is that people in cities are there to have homes, live, produce, and study."

***The Brazilian Economy*—You were the author of the Master Plan that made possible the BRT (Bus Rapid Transit) in Curitiba. Why was the BRT so successful in Curitiba, and why we do not see the same success in other Brazilian cities?**

***Jorge Wilheim*—**The case of Curitiba is based on a very simple axiom: where there are a lot of people, public transport is essential. The relation between population density and transport is obvious. So I identified where the important city corridors were, and there I placed dense zoning to allow more people to live in the region, and adequate roads for bus transportation. What happens in other cities . . . is weakness in both the planning system and the vision in relation to market forces that pull back and forth, twisting things that are natural and obvious.

Why in other cities, such as Bogota in Colombia, has the BRT been successful?

In Bogotá, the city administration expropriated an area four times larger than the one in Curitiba. The width of the Trans Millennium, the BRT system, is huge. It can fit in many lanes for cars as well as buses and very wide sidewalks. That has not happened in Curitiba on the same

scale. In Bogotá they bet that it will not be necessary to have metro rail in future, but I think it will be. Today I'm afraid to do a survey in Curitiba to know how many people who live next to the BRT system use it . . . . My guess is that, although the public transport runs close to many apartment buildings, the purchasing power of the middle class and the prestige of owning a car have not been sufficiently counterbalanced by the traffic congestion. Traffic is heavy in Curitiba, but it has not reached the levels of acute traffic jams, as in São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro.

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Today there is greater awareness of the need to make public transport a priority. Do you think the major cities are investing adequately in public transport?

First, keep in mind that the automobile is an object of desire. Luigi Pirandello said that the automobile is an invention of the devil. It is beautiful, it is sensual, and it gives a sense of freedom. With a car we can go when we want, where we want, and with whom we want . . . . This attachment to freedom is innate in humans, and the car symbolizes that. . . . Henry Ford used to say "There's a Ford in your future." Big brand advertising from the beginning of the automobile in the 1950s really drew on our belief that there's a car in our future.

Second is the question of credit. It was interesting that the Brazilian government, facing the 2008 crisis, decided to carry out countercyclical policies. At that time, President Lula was the most Keynesian of Keynesian. And he hit it. He gave credit to automotive and construction industries. Of course this increased the number of automobiles on the streets, just as it increased the number of buildings . . . .

But we cannot blame the Brazilian government for traffic congestion. Even if there hadn't been a recent increase in automobile sales, the number of cars no longer fits on the roads of São Paulo or Rio de Janeiro . . . . We had misguided policies that have caused huge underdevelopment throughout the country. The abandonment of the railroad in Brazil was a clear mistake. But today the transport gap is further complicated by increased traffic jams. Today there is initiative [for investment in public transport] . . . . We must demand that these projects and investments are made.

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Today, there seems to be awareness that improvements in transport should go along with attracting more people to live in the center and more economic activity to the periphery. However, cities like São Paulo should be thought of as a macro-metropolis, encompassing Campinas, Santos, Sorocaba, and São José dos Campos. Is there any possibility of policy changing to encourage inter-municipal planning?

We are prepared to discuss it—but not to operate it. The macro region of São Paulo has about 24 million inhabitants, of whom about 3 million move daily between home and work. But both people and institutions tend to be conservative; only urban dynamics and life itself forces them to change — through crises, chaos, and revolutions. Nothing happens a minute before. We must take into account that the difficulties of urban management take in more than just space planning . . . . The major change [in public administration] is to work for a program. If the issue is traffic jams, it is clear that the Secretary of Transportation participates, but it is also true that the Secretaries of Housing, Industry, Trade also participate. In addition, the Communication Secretary, users, and NGOs should participate. Once the traffic jam problem is resolved, the network dissolves. Another program may derive from this, but the grouping of people will be different. Private companies work that way. In the public sector it is more difficult because politicians want to preserve their power. But we must learn to manage that way.

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In urban planning, you advocate that it is more important to worry about anthropology than statistics. Why?

What is urbanism? It is the art and science of cities. Cities are large urbanized regions . . . . People are coming here to live, produce, and study. The quality of that life is what matters for humans. You have to analyze how people live — not only identify major groupings and make statistical surveys but know the heart of this life. Rio inhabitants do not live the same way as those in São Paulo, who do not live the same way as inhabitants of a small town in Minas Gerais. You need to understand what the fundamental systems of life are and give quality to them. Mobility, which is necessarily in fashion, is important, but the quality of transport is also important . . . . So urbanism has to have a view of life and people in their activities. That is why it is

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necessary to transform space into place, to have spaces that mean places. You measure space, and space is the place to which you lend emotion, that you choose for your activities, you adopt into your life.

Do you consider yourself optimistic about the moment the country is experiencing?

I am an optimist. I think the street demonstrations were important and will not stop. They were a qualitative leap in participation; however, in appearance it has been chaotic. Of course, if it stays chaotic, it will dissolve. But I have hope that it will end in positive pressure on political leaders.

It is also good to remember that not everything that has happened in our cities so far has been negative. Some people miss the past. I came to Brazil in 1940. I was impressed with the number of kids and adults in the streets barefoot . . . . It was a state of poverty I did not know. To say that the past was better is not true. The country has moved. Let's remember that at the time of the Proclamation of the Republic, 130 years ago, 80% of the population were illiterate. What degree of politicization could you aspire to if there was no way to communicate in writing? At the time of the Industrial Revolution, the life expectancy in England was 41 years. Today, it has nearly doubled, and in Brazil as well. By no means was the past good.

